

UNDERSTANDING DISABILITY POLITICS IN MALTA: NEW DIRECTIONS EXPLORED

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In this **poster exhibition**, I do not mean to write in any authoritative capacity. I recognise my position as a non-disabled researcher.

Eventually, my responsibility is to document trends and inclinations in the development of the Disability Movement in Malta. Foremost importance will be given to the new generation of young disabled activists I have interviewed in my fieldwork. The backbone of what is presented here is achieved through the analysis of fieldwork outcomes, literature review and personal reflections I have amassed.

I will also set out to document the historical context of disability politics in Malta, appraise fieldwork findings, attempt to define disability politics in Malta and explore potential new avenues. I hope that by identifying contentious debates of disabled activists, I would be able to chart the future of disability politics and the disability movement in Malta. My work will ultimately prove futile if it is not critically recognised by the disabled community and so my research findings were audited by members of the disability community.

Don't assume that your version of what the change should be is the one that could or should be implemented. You have to change your reality of what should be through interaction with others ... Conflict and disagreement are ... fundamental to change ... Effective change takes time ... Don't expect all, or even most, people or groups to change. Progress occurs by increasing the number of people affected (Robson, 1993, p. 443).

There is still a long way ahead. Young disabled activists have realised that politicisation is necessary, getting organised inevitable and a disability movement essential. I have made a full-circle in my research. I left from the position where I was exploring the possibility of disability coalition as a possible and tangible alternative. I am now at a point where disabled people want to reclaim their rights and to have complete control over their life. The old methods are no longer valid, it is action, presence, formation and power that disabled people want. Ultimately, compromise is not acceptable but management of "their own lives".

It is action that we want ... we need to become more forceful and assertive ... if necessary we have to strap ourselves to public transport buses, protest in front of the office of the Prime Minister ... we have to be activists ready to go all the way, determined to see changes (Disabled Activist).

Understanding disability politics in Malta requires **new directions!**

QUOTE

“Disability culture. Say What? Aren’t disabled people just isolated victims of nature or circumstances? Yes and no.

True, we are far too often isolated. Locked away in the pits, closets, and institutions of enlightened societies everywhere. But there is a growing consciousness among us: ‘that is not acceptable’. Because there is always an underground. Notes get passed among survivors. And the notes we’re passing these days say, ‘there’s power in difference. Power. Pass the word. Culture. It’s about passing the word. And disability culture is passing the word that there’s a new definition of disability and it includes power. Culture. New definitions, new inflections”.

CONTEXT

'I don't think anyone knows for sure what a disability movement is but essentially what we are talking about is a set of ideas and an analysis which people can then support in different ways. I always think of the movement as a set of people that have somehow made a connection with a set of ideas' (Campbell & Oliver, 1997, p. 21).

'But like UPIAS before it, BCODP denies the claims of such groups to be representative in any sense, suggests that expert representation can only be counter-productive, and argues that the only way forward is to fully involve disabled people in their own political movement' (Oliver, 1990, p. 110).

AFFIRMATION

As a disabled person in Society you experience the dead weight of oppression in myriad forms and instances, which accumulate to give you a distorted image of self, and low self-esteem and poor sense of worth. This is internalised oppression (Reiser as cited in Azzopardi, 1999a, p. 3).

I would like to start off by affirming my status as an 'outsider'. Much as I look forward to being accepted as an ally in the disability community, considered non-disabled by mainstream society, I recognise my position as an 'outsider' (Barton, 2000).

CHOICE OF METHODOLOGY

Recognising my responsibility as a non-disabled researcher was a very important component when developing my methodology. There were two core motives that contributed to maintaining this stability;

- 1. Regular informal discussion with key disabled activists in Malta. The importance of self-reflection and the need to have what Clough and Barton (1995) refer to as “critical friends” helped me reflect on every stage of my personal and professional rapport with disability studies.**

2. Respecting a literature review, which in various instances urges disabled and non-disabled researchers to synergise rather than polarise their expertise and experiences (Clough & Barton, 1995; Germon, 1999). Fundamentally, the individual researchers need to be committed to emancipatory research (Barnes & Mercer, 1997) and “where we position ourselves between the social and material relations of research production” (Oliver as cited in Corker & French, 1999, p. 187).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Short-term

- Provide skills training for disabled activists.
- Down size special schools.
- NCPD to involve more disabled people in its operations.
- Disabled people are to get organised in a group and work together towards a common struggle.
- Resolve personality issues amongst leading parent activists and their organisations.

Long-term

- Invest in professionals training.
- FODP to review its statute and operations. It has to become more representative of disabled people who are not affiliated with any organisation.

- **An information campaign on the social model of disability.**
- **An information campaign on the use of the Equal Opportunities Legislation.**
- **Support disabled people with basic services like adequate transport and personal assistance schemes to ensure more flexibility of disabled people.**
- **Combat strategically oppressive practices of professionals and non-disabled persons especially from the medical field.**
- **A commitment by the FODP to increase by 10% the Presidents/ Chairpersons in organisations of disabled people over the next two years.**
- **A commitment by the FODP to increase by 12% disabled people in Committees of disabled people in the next two years.**

SHOCKING STATS

Organisations affiliated with the Federation of Organisations for Persons with Disability

	%
Not affiliated	52
Affiliated	48

The role of “your” Organisation

	%
Service provider	28
Support, service provider and self-advocacy	21
Support	18
Support and self advocacy	12
Support and service provider	9
Self advocacy	6
Self advocacy and service provider	6

The President/Chairperson of the Organisation

	%
Parent of disabled person	37
Disabled person	24
Professional	18
Pensioner	3
Clergy	3
Other	15

Number of people in committees

	%
Total number of people in committees	100
Parents of disabled people	25
Professionals	18
Disabled people	13
Parents with a disability	3
Not specified	41